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ABSTRACT

This 2-wave panel survey of young people was conducted to explore the relationship between attitudes and viewing over time, examining aggressiveness and viewing of programs portraying physical and verbal aggression. Questionnaires were administered to 227 children in the fourth, sixth, and eighth grades in 1976 and again one year later. The pertinent variables in this analysis are exposure to physically and verbally aggressive programming, and reports of physical and verbal aggressiveness. Of secondary importance are measures of program prohibition, grade, and sex. This study provides supportive evidence for selective exposure to aggressive television entertainment programming which is compatible with aggressive attitudinal predispositions. Even with a conservative regression analysis that controls for grade, sex, and initial viewing patterns, a significant relationship remained between prior orientations and subsequent program choices. Findings of this study suggest that a portion of the basic relationship between viewing and aggressiveness may be attributable to selective exposure rather than the reverse viewing-causes-aggression sequence. (RAO)

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SELECTIVE EXPOSURE TO TELEVISED AGGRESSION

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Report No. 7

SELECTIVE EXPOSURE TO TELEVISED AGGRESSION

The selective exposure proposition has enjoyed a rich and controversial tradition in mass communication research, tracing back to the classic voting studies of the 1940's.[1] Most applications have been limited to informational or persuasive content, such as exposure to political propaganda, anti-smoking campaigns, or automobile advertising.[2] This investigation extends the idea to entertainment content on television, focusing on exposure to violent programming.

In conventional conceptualizations, selective exposure is usually defined as the subset of exposure decisions based on defensive needs to reinforce prior dispositions.[3] Thus, researchers have compared message selection patterns of Republican vs. Democratic voters, smokers vs. non-smokers, and Ford vs. Chevrolet owners. The basic hypothesis predicts that audience members prefer supportive rather than discrepant messages, in an attempt to increase confidence that they think, feel, or act in a correct or acceptable manner. Although laboratory experiments reviewed by Sears and Freedman have provided contradictory evidence, most researchers have found that individuals are selectively exposed to reinforcing messages in the mass media.[4] However, the preference for supportive content is only one of many factors that influence exposure decisions.

Determinants of media exposure. According to the formulation proposed by Atkin, the simple act of mass media exposure is determined by a complex set of factors involving needs of the receiver and attributes of the message.[5] Media content is selected for two basic purposes: instrumental utility (where messages are acquired to provide subsequent social and psychological adaptation) and intrinsic gratification (where messages are chosen for transitory satisfaction of personal tastes or intrinsic interests). In the

utilitarian mode, information can be useful for either formation or confirmation of orientations -- maintaining surveillance, guiding decisions, or performing actions in the formative state, and verifying knowledge, defending attitudes, and reinforcing behaviors at the confirmatory stage. Since selective exposure applies only to the latter stage, preferences for supportive information may be outweighted by the other components of subjective message value. This is especially true when transitory satisfactions are the dominant reasons for exposure.

The expected uses and gratifications must be balanced against the costs of obtaining and processing the message. Although a segment of content is attractive, it may require expenditure of effort, time, or money that exceeds the anticipated benefits.

Television entertainment exposure. Most research on the determinants of exposure patterns has focused on "information" that deals with social, economic, or political issues -- news stories, editorials, public service announcements, or advertisements. A case must be made to include TV "entertainment" among the types of content that are subject to selective exposure tendencies of the audience.

Prime-time television portrayals, although fictional, have become more "relevant" in depicting substantive social behaviors and issues. The current generation of programs has more realistic plots in contemporary settings; shows now discuss social role themes and present vivid acts of physical and verbal aggression. Thus, 1970's content provides a more pertinent basis for selectivity in defense of a viewer's predispositions; e.g., Police Woman has more utilitarian relevance to aggressive attitudes than Gunsmoke had in the 1960's.

Televised aggression appears to be the most appropriate type of content for a selective exposure study, because (a) there is considerable variation

from program to program in the amount of both physical violence and verbal abuse and (b) within the subset of aggressive programs, there is a fairly consistent theme that violence or abuse are appropriate and successful responses to conflict situations.[6]

On the other hand, there are two basic features of television entertainment viewing that should weaken the degree to which selective exposure operates.

First, the subjective message value of TV entertainment is largely determined by the sheer entertainment qualities rather than utilitarian attributes. Moreover, there are viewing rewards beyond those provided by the content inputs -- some gratification is derived from the mere act of processing messages from this medium, regardless of substance. Motivation studies show that people will watch almost anything to relax, escape worries, avoid loneliness, or combat boredom.[7]

Second, several cost factors are uniquely different for television programs. Since exposure to one program necessarily displaces viewing of another show in that time slot, this competing program becomes an added cost component. Another factor is the lack of full personal control over program selection, since others may pre-empt the TV set for their own program choice or prohibit certain viewing choices. Other cost dimensions are substantially reduced for TV; compared to the print media, acquiring programs is monetarily cheaper and processing stimuli is less taxing mentally. Thus, attitudinally supportive programs may be missed due to displacement or limited freedom of choice, and discrepant shows may still be viewed if the meager reward value exceeds the low expenditures required.

Selective exposure to aggression. This theoretical discussion suggests that selective exposure to television is quite limited, but is quite likely to be expressed for programs portraying physical and verbal aggression.

Thus, it is hypothesized that viewers will exhibit a modest tendency to be selectively exposed to programs that are supportive of their aggressive predispositions.

There is some prior evidence indicating that selective exposure may be operative for violent programming. A number of survey investigations have found that children and adolescents with aggressive predispositions tend to watch a greater amount of violence on television.[8] However, the direction of causality is not clear in such correlational field studies; a common alternative conclusion is that violence viewing causes the aggressive attitudes.

Chaffee sought to examine the selectivity question by focusing on studies that measured violence in "favorite" programs rather than violence viewing across all programs.[9] He reasoned that those few shows that viewers identified as favorites would be more adequate as a dependent variable (resulting from predispositions) than as an independent variable (producing attitudes), since the anticipated small number of preferred shows would not constitute a strong stimulus.

Studies of favorite program viewing yield modest evidence of selectivity. Robinson and Backman discovered that delinquent aggressiveness in late adolescence was linked to favorite violent programs.[10] McIntyre and Teevan found that deviance and violence approval were both related to preference for violent programs among adolescents.[11] Aggressive students, both self-identified and as selected by school officials, had more violent programs as favorites.[12] Although Lefkowitz, Eron, Walder and Huesmann reported a positive relationship between aggressiveness and violence preferences in childhood, aggression was a negative predictor of violence viewing measured in the same sample ten years later.[13] In one experimental study, Freedman and Newtson manipulated temporary aggressive disposition by angering half a group of subjects. The angered group showed a higher preference for seeing violent films than did

the non-angered control group.[14]

Since the correlational surveys do not allow for a confident inference regarding direction of causality, a time-order design is necessary to analyze the issue. If it can be documented that the attitudinal orientation toward aggression exists before viewing patterns are formed or changed, then much of the causal ambiguity is reduced. The only over-time design was used in the Lefkowitz study, which had several weaknesses; the 10 year time lag was overlong (aggressive dispositions changed markedly between childhood and early adulthood, making the third grade predictor variable unsatisfactory) and the viewing measure was severely limited (just the three favorite shows were assessed).

A two-wave panel survey of young people conducted at Michigan State University offers a valuable opportunity to explore the relationship between attitudes and viewing over time. The study examines aggressiveness and viewing of programs portraying physical and verbal aggression; the Time 1 attitudinal disposition is used as a predictor of Time 2 exposure patterns, while controlling for initial exposure and the key demographic attributes of grade and sex.

Method

Questionnaires were administered to 227 children in the fourth, sixth, and eighth grades in 1976 and again one year later. Students lived in working class and middle class neighborhoods in two Michigan and Wisconsin towns. The 227 mothers of these respondents were also personally interviewed to provide supplementary information.

The pertinent variables in this analysis are exposure to physically and verbally aggressive programming, and reports of physical and verbal aggressiveness. Of secondary importance are measures of program prohibition, grade, and sex.

Exposure: The survey instrument listed 29 programs that were being aired during the 1975-76 season; the 23 prime-time and 6 Saturday morning shows had been identified as most viewed by this age group in pre-tests. For each show, respondents could mark a box representing frequency of viewing in four steps from "never" to "every week." The second wave questionnaire used the same format and 29 of the same programs, plus three substitute programs debuting in the 1976-77 season (Charlie's Angels, Baa Baa Black Sheep, and Jabber Jaw).

Content analyses provided data on the frequency of physically and verbally aggressive acts for each program studied.[15] The child's viewing frequency level was multiplied by each type of aggression content to yield a score for every program, and the products were summed across the 29 shows each season to provide verbal and physical-aggression viewing indices.

Dispositions: Indices of physical aggressiveness and verbal aggressiveness were constructed each year to correspond to the two exposure indices. In this analysis, the disposition measures are hypothetical response tendencies to vignettes of various frustrating situations (i.e., "What if someone cut in front of you in a long line. What would you do -- would you push them out?" or "would you yell at them?"). The response alternatives for each hypothetical reaction were "yes," "maybe," or "no." Mothers were also asked to indicate how their child would respond to some of the situations. Eleven-item combined mother-child indices were constructed for physical aggression at both Time 1 and Time 2; 11-item and 9-item indices represented verbal aggression at each point in time.

Since parental control over viewing of anti-social programming may limit the child's exercise of selective exposure, the degree of prohibition of programs is also examined. Both mothers and children were asked to indicate whether the child was prohibited from watching each of eight shows high in physical aggression, three verbally aggressive programs, plus others such as violent movies and soap operas.

In the analysis, multiple regression is used to predict each Time 2 viewing index. The predictors are Time 1 viewing, Time 1 disposition, grade, and sex. The regressions are also computed separately for boys vs. girls, and for older vs. younger respondents.

Results

Physical aggressiveness at Time 1 correlates +.24 with Time 2 physical aggression exposure, as indicated in Table I. Younger children and boys tend to watch more violent programming, and Time 1 exposure is closely related to Time 2 exposure (+.64). The four predictor variables were entered into a regression analysis, yielding the beta weights in Table I. Although diminished in strength, the contribution of aggressiveness remains significant.

Similar findings occur for verbal aggressiveness. Youths who score high in Time 1 verbal aggressiveness tend to watch more Time 2 verbally aggressive programs; the beta weight is significantly positive. The across-time exposure measures are strongly inter-related.

Those programs which had the highest levels of physical aggression are examined individually in the bottom half of Table I. The first column describes the zero-order correlations with Time 1 physical aggressiveness dispositions, which range from +.09 to +.31. The beta weights in the four-predictor regression are significant for six shows. Two programs are of particular importance in this analysis: Baa Baa Black Sheep and Charlie's Angels, the new prime-time "action" shows in the second year of the study, both tend to attract aggressive viewers. Indeed, Time 2 physical aggression exposure is no more strongly related to viewing of these new shows ($r = +.20$ for Baa Baa Black Sheep and $r = +.30$ for Charlie's Angels) than is Time 1 physical aggression. A second noteworthy result is the weak relationship between aggressiveness

and exposure to the three Saturday morning cartoons. And finally, note that of the six shows yielding significant beta weights, three feature aggressive male heros, and three star aggressive female heroines.

Table II shows that the physical aggressiveness beta weights are stronger for boys than for girls, indicating that aggressive boys have a stronger preference for male-dominant violent programs. This reverses for verbal aggressiveness, with girls having the significant beta weight. Boys selectively expose to physical violence content to the same extent that girls expose to verbally violent content. Table II also displays the differential associations for two grade levels. The physical aggressiveness beta weight is substantially larger for the older students, with no difference found for verbal aggressiveness.

Since parental constraints may intervene between desired vs. actual viewing of violent programming, the amount of parental control over programs is analyzed as a contingent variable. The sample was divided into those with moderate vs. low levels of parental control,[16] and the relationship between aggressiveness and viewing was examined in each subgroup. The over-time correlation between physical aggression and violence exposure is +.30 where few restrictions exist, and +.16 in the restricted subgroup. Since level of prohibition is associated with age level, the beta weights provide a more valid basis for comparison. Controlling for Time 1 exposure, grade, and sex, the aggression-exposure coefficient is stronger for low restriction respondents by a +.18 to +.11 margin. In both comparisons, parental restraints inhibit or reduce the exposure-aggression relationship.

Discussion

This panel survey provides supportive evidence for selective exposure to aggressive television entertainment programming which is compatible with aggressive attitudinal predispositions. Even with a conservative regression analysis that controls for grade, sex, and initial viewing patterns, a significant relationship remains between prior orientations and subsequent program choices.

There are some alternative explanations that might account for part of the association. The type of TV program examined here has multiple utilities and gratifications, aside from reinforcement qualities, which may be rewarding for the same individuals who are similarly disposed on the attitudinal dimensions under study. For example, aggressive viewers may prefer violent programs in order to use the aggressive characters as role models for guiding their anti-social behaviors enactments, or because of intrinsic tastes for heavy action as an art form. Measurement of the full range of audience needs and program attributes is needed to precisely determine the contribution of the various factors.

The findings suggest that a portion of the basic relationship between viewing and aggressiveness, which has been reported in several single-wave field surveys, may be attributable to selective exposure rather than the reverse viewing-causes-aggression sequence. This evidence may serve to temper inferences from purely correlational findings in survey studies.

Some of the specific findings deserve closer comment. First, aggressive dispositions are a significant predictor of exposure to new programs that appeared a year after the attitudes were measured; this finding mainly applies to more "realistic" dramatic programs that should most strongly support predispositions, and not to the less reinforcing "fantasy" cartoons.

The finding of stronger selectivity among boys for manly violent content and greater selective exposure among girls for the more female-appropriate verbal aggression programming is consistent with the literature on aggression sex-typing. Although there is massive evidence regarding viewing-physical aggression linkages, little effort has gone to examining any viewing-verbal aggression association.

The differential degree of selective exposure by age group is also noteworthy. Younger children in the fourth grade exhibit considerably less selectivity than the older respondents. This is consonant with cognitive development theories that predict increasing discrimination of mediated stimuli with more sophisticated processing capacity; in addition, the content probably becomes more attitudinally relevant as children mature and develop deeper needs for reinforcement rather than mere entertainment. Finally, the evidence on parental restrictions on exposure to certain programs suggests that this contingent factor may suppress the behavioral implementation of some internal selective exposure preferences. Parents can effectively mediate their children's predispositions.

Footnotes

[1] P. Lazarsfeld, B. Berelson and H. Gaudet, The People's Choice (New York: Columbia University Press, 1948); B. Berelson, P. Lazarsfeld and W. McPhee, Voting (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1954).

[2] For reviews of this research, see J. Klapper, Effects of Mass Communication (New York: Free Press, 1960); D. Sears and J. Freedman, "Selective Exposure to Information: A Critical Review," Public Opinion Quarterly, 31:194-213 (1967); and C. Atkin, "Instrumental Utilities and Information Seeking," in P. Clarke (ed.) New Models for Mass Communication Research (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1973), pp. 205-242.

[3] The term selective exposure is really a misnomer, since all exposure to mediated stimuli is actually selective in the sense that the receiver systematically considers message attributes in deciding whether to seek, accept, ignore, or avoid the various messages available in the mass media. In conventional usage, however, "selective" pertains to psychological preferences for supportive information.

[4] Sears and Freedman, op. cit.; Atkin, op. cit.; E. Katz, "On Re-Opening the Question of Selectivity in Exposure to Mass Communication," in R. Abelson, et al., (eds.), Theories of Cognitive Consistency (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1968).

[5] Atkin, op. cit.

[6] L. Gross, G. Gerbner, M. Eleey, M. Jackson-Beeck, S. Jeffries-Fox and N. Signorielli, "TV Violence Profile No. 8: The Highlights," Journal of Communication, 27:171-190 (1977); B. Greenberg, C. Atkin, N. Edison and F. Korzenny, "Pro-Social and Anti-Social Behavior on Commercial Television," Report #1, Project Castle, Department of Communication, Michigan State University (1977).

[7] B. Greenberg and J. Dominick, "Racial and Social Class Differences in Teenagers' Use of Television," Journal of Broadcasting, 13:331-344 (1969).

[8] J. McLeod, C. Atkin and S. Chaffee, "Adolescents, Parents, and Television Use," in G. Comstock and E. Rubinstein (eds), Television and Social Behavior: Television and Adolescent Aggressiveness (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1972), pp. 173-313; J. Dominick and B. Greenberg, "Attitudes Toward Violence: Interaction of Television, Exposure, and Family Attitudes," in G. Comstock and E. Rubinstein, ibid., pp. 314-335. These and similar studies are reviewed by C. Atkin, J. Murray and O. Nayman, "The Surgeon General's Research Program on Television and Social Behavior," Journal of Broadcasting, 16:1-14 (1972-72).

[9] S. Chaffee, "Television and Adolescent Aggressiveness," in G. Comstock and E. Rubinstein, op. cit., pp. 1-34.

[10] J. Robinson and J. Backman, "Television Viewing Habits and Aggression," in G. Comstock and E. Rubinstein, op. cit., pp. 372-382.

[11] J. McIntyre and J. Teevan, "Television Violence and Deviant Behavior," in G. Comstock and E. Rubinstein, op. cit., 383-435.

[12] H. Friedman and R. Johnson, "Mass Media Use and Aggression: A Pilot Study," in G. Comstock and E. Rubinstein, op. cit., pp. 336-360.

[13] M. Lefkowitz, L. Eron, L. Walder and L. Huesmann, "Television Violence and Child Aggression: A Followup Study," in G. Comstock and E. Rubinstein, op. cit., pp. 35-135. In examining these correlational studies, Chaffee noted that selectivity seemed to be restricted to white males. Since white males are the class of characters committing the most violence on TV, perhaps aggressive selective exposure is contingent upon the social role characteristics of the aggressive models. See Chaffee, op. cit.

[14] J. Freedman and Newtson, "The Effect of Anger on Preference for Filmed Violence," paper presented at annual conference of American Psychological Association, Chicago, 1975.

[15] Greenberg, Atkin, Edison and Korzenny, op. cit.

[16] According to the reports of the children, just 10% to 20% were prohibited from watching various violent programs; the prohibition levels are about twice as high by parental reports. Viewing frequency for prohibited programs was only moderately lower than for unregulated programs, providing sufficient variance in the violence exposure variable for the subgroup experiencing parental restrictions. The level of prohibition of verbally aggressive programs was too low to interfere with freedom of choice, so contingent analyses were not performed.

TABLE I

Multiple Regression Analyses for Time 2 Aggression Exposure

Exposure variable:	Predictor variables:	Zero-order correlation	Beta weight	
Time 2 Physical Agg. Exposure	Time 1 Physical Aggression	+.24	+.14*	
	Time 1 Physical Agg. Exposure	+.64	+.60**	
	Grade of child	-.25	-.17*	
	Sex of child	-.16	+.05	R^2=.45
Time 2 Verbal Agg. Exposure	Time 1 Verbal Aggression	+.17	+.13*	
	Time 1 Verbal Agg. Exposure	+.61	+.58**	
	Grade of child	-.20	-.16*	
	Sex of child	-.08	-.03	R^2=.41

Time 2 program exposure items:	Time 1 physical agg. correlation	Beta weight[a]
Six Million Dollar Man	+.31	+.19**
Baa Baa Black Sheep	+.31	+.17**
Charlie's Angels	+.25	+.19**
Bionic Woman	+.21	+.18**
Police Woman	+.20	+.22**
Kojak	+.16	+.15*
Hawaii Five-O	+.11	+.02
Starsky and Hutch	+.10	+.10
Pink Panther	+.10	+.03
Bugs Bunny	+.10	+.04
Rockford Files	+.09	+.04
Jabber Jaw	+.09	+.06

* $p<.05$ ** $p<.01$

[a] In the individual program portion of the table, the beta weights are derived from regressions including sex, grade, and the Time 1 exposure to the same program (except for Charlie's Angels, Baa Baa Black Sheep, and Jabber Jaw, where the general Time 1 Physical Aggression Exposure Index is used).

TABLE II

Multiple Regression Analyses for Sex and Grade Subgroups[a]

Exposure variable:	Predictor variables:		Zero-order correlation	Beta weight
Time 2 Physical Agg. Exposure	Time 1 Physical Aggression			
		Boys	+.22	+.15*
		Girls	+.16	+.09
		Younger	+.10	+.09
		Older	+.32	+.17*
Time 2 Verbal Agg. Exposure	Time 1 Verbal Aggression			
		Boys	+.10	+.12
		Girls	+.21	+.15*
		Younger	+.19	+.12
		Older	+.17	+.11

[a]For the subgroups, Girls N=115, Boys N=112; Older (6th-8th graders) N=153, Younger (4th graders) N=74. Each regression included Time 1 aggression, Time 1 exposure, and either sex or grade as appropriate; the regression analysis was computed separately within each subgroup.